

HUD's

HOMELESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS



A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People



Office of Community Planning and Development

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Homeless People**

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1. Introduction

Many communities have long understood the need to count, describe, and understand the homeless people who do not use shelters and are typically found on the streets, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not meant for human habitation. Unsheltered homeless people are an important subpopulation of homeless persons and their characteristics and needs must be accommodated within any strategy to reduce homelessness. Collecting good baseline data about this subpopulation is essential to understanding the causes of homelessness and to designing effective responses, and can be used as a basis for comparison in future years. Moreover, continued data collection at regular intervals is needed to track progress toward reducing homelessness.

This guide describes several methods for identifying, counting, and learning something about homeless people who are unlikely to be found in shelters or in other residential programs within a local homeless assistance network. Information about these approaches was gathered from communities throughout the country; examples of their methods are provided throughout the guide. The guide *does not* discuss how to collect data on homeless people who are housed in shelters or how to estimate local need for housing and services for homeless people. These topics will be addressed separately by HUD. Approaches to counting sheltered homeless people are described in detail in Martha R. Burt's *Practical Methods for Counting the Homeless: A Manual for State and Local Jurisdictions*.¹ In addition, this guide *does not* discuss methods for counting people who are at risk of homelessness (i.e., families facing eviction or households living with friends or family).

The primary users of this guide are likely to be agencies involved in Continuums of Care (CoCs), state and local government agencies, and regional councils of government. Others who may find it helpful include: state and local legislative bodies needing to allocate resources among several jurisdictions or programs; state and local service planners; and officials of agencies whose particular service focus (e.g., health, mental health, substance abuse) contributes to ending chronic homelessness (see Section 2.2 for HUD's definition of chronic homelessness).

This guide is part of HUD's larger technical assistance effort to help CoCs prepare annual Continuum of Care funding applications and meet Congressional directives on improving the quality of information on homelessness. Since 2003, the CoC application has required Continuums to report the number of people who are homeless in the community at a particular time. In the past, some CoCs based these estimates on data that they themselves collected annually through a street and shelter count or by some other mechanism. However, many CoCs took national research findings or statistics from other jurisdictions and applied

¹ Martha R. Burt. *Practical Methods for Counting the Homeless: A Manual for State and Local Jurisdictions*. 2nd edition, June 1996, available from the Urban Institute Press [877-847-7377 or www.uiipress.org].

those findings to their own community – in essence, estimating a count without looking directly at local data, particularly data for homeless people who do not routinely use shelters.

Starting with the 2003 Continuum of Care application, HUD encouraged CoCs to use a new homeless population and subpopulations chart to *collect* local data on the number and characteristics of unsheltered homeless people. CoCs were also asked to describe the methodology used to collect the reported data on unsheltered homeless people. HUD requested similar information in 2004 and will continue to do so in future applications. This chart is now part of the Consolidated Plan section on homeless needs.

How to Use This Guide

If you are unfamiliar with the topic of counting unsheltered homeless people, we suggest that you read **Chapter 2** first. It provides basic information on: why it is important to count unsheltered people and what communities have learned to date from counting the unsheltered; the challenges to counting homeless people who do not use shelters; and key HUD definitions and standards. The chapter ends by introducing the three approaches to collecting data on unsheltered homeless people that are covered in the guide.

If you have a general familiarity with the topic, you may want to turn directly to Chapters 3 and/or 4, which present “how-to” information on conducting counts. **Chapter 3** describes the steps involved in conducting counts of homeless people in public places (often referred to as “street” counts). If you are interested in public places counts, with or without an interview component, turn to page 13.

Chapter 4 describes counting and collecting information on unsheltered homeless people who use non-shelter services, either homeless-specific services, such as soup kitchens, or mainstream social services, such as Food Stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). If you are interested in these “serviced-based” counts, turn to page 38.

Finally, **Chapter 5** presents examples of simple enumeration forms and detailed surveys that CoCs have used for interviews. The chapter also includes examples of the timelines two communities follow to prepare for their counts and provides contact information for the Continuums cited in this guide. To see this information, turn to page 54.